(e) whether Government would nominate peoples' representative to all Cantonment Boards in India, pending elections;

(f) whether Government would increase the number of ward members under every Cantonment Board, based on the latest census figures;

(g) if so, the details thereof; and

(h) if not, the reasons therefor?

THE MINISTER OF DEFENCE (SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE): (a) to (c) Yes, Sir. A comprehensive Bill, Cantonment Bill, 2003, has been introduced in Parliament and is presently with Standing Committee on Defence. Elections as per law will be conducted when the Bill is passed.

(d) Provisions for the reservation for women have been made in the Cantonments Bill, 2003, presently being examined by the Standing Committee on Defence and accordingly seats for women will be reserved while holding elections to Cantonment Boards as per provisions of law.

(e) Yes, Sir.

(f) to (h) There is no provision either under the existing Cantonment Act, 1924, or in the new Cantonments Bill, 2003, to increase the members of every Cantonment Board based on the last census figures.

Financial aid by MOD for gauge conversion in Bihar

2980. PROF. RAM DEO BHANDARY: Will the Minister of DEFENCE be pleased to state:

(a) the plan of financial assistance to be provided by the Ministry of Defence for gauge conversion of Sakari-Jhanjharpur-Nirmali and Jhanjharpur-Lokha railway track in Madhubani district of Bihar;

(b) whether the then Defence Minister had announced this during the foundation stone ceremony in Jhanjharpur before Lok Sabha election;

(c) if so, the latest position in this regard; and

(d) the action taken by the Government in this direction?

THE MINISTER OF DEFENCE (SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE): (a) to (d) The work of gauge conversion of Saharsa junction-Forbesgang and Sakri-Laukaha Bazaar-Nirmali section has been included in the Supplementary Budget 2003-04 of the Ministry of Railways at an anticipated cost of Rs. 355.81 crore, to be funded through defence funds. The foundation stones for the two sections had been laid on 8.2.2004 by the then Defence Minister. An outlay of Rs. 10 crore has been proposed for this work in Budget 2005-2006 of the Ministry of Railways.

Development of Hi-tech weapons system with US Co-operation

2981. SHRIMATI N.P. DURGA: Will the Minister of DEFENCE be pleased to state:

(a) whether US has offered co-operation in joint development of hi-tech weapons system, including missile defence shield;

(b) whether it is true that US offered to India F-18s and other nuclear technology as compensation to its sale of F-16s to Pakistan; and

(c) if so, the details thereof ?

THE MINISTER OF DEFENCE (SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE): (a) The United States (US) has conveyed its readiness to cooperate with India in the sale, production and joint development of defence equipment, including in areas of advanced defence technologies. This has included a limited interaction on missile defence.

(b) to (c) The US has responded to a Request for Information (RFI) for medium (below 20 tonnes) Multi Role Combat Aircraft (MRCA) clearing US manufacturers of F-16 and F-18 aircraft for the Request for Proposal (RFP). The US have also offered an energy dialogue which could include cooperation on nuclear energy for civilian use.

Replacement of Cheetah and Chetak helicopters

2982. SHRI RAMA MUNI REDDY SIRIGIREDDY: Will the Minister of DEFENCE be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is true that Cheetah and Chetak helicopters have become obsolete and are not able to address the surveillance system in high altitude regions;